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Azerbaijan protests broken up as riot police move in

The Azerbaijani authorities must halt their crackdown on freedom of assembly, Amnesty International said today, after a "Day of Wrath" protest saw scores arrested and others violently dispersed in the capital Baku. The Public Chamber Committee, who organized the rally, said that as many as 150 people had been arrested as they attempted to demonstrate.

Hundreds of riot police gathered in central Baku to stop Saturday's protest, which was inspired by those in the Middle East and North Africa and organized by opposition parties using Facebook.

"The current Azerbaijani regime has a history of preventing and obstructing public gatherings," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"Their reaction to today's protest and the demonstrations back in March this year starkly reveals the complete refusal of the authorities to tolerate any form of visible public protest."

Police blocked off all streets leading to the designated rally point in Fountain Square, using shields and truncheons to disperse those arriving for protest, human rights activists present at the rally told Amnesty International.

Protestors attempting to gather at different locations were pursued by police and dispersed. At least 10 protestors were arrested outside Baku's 28 May Metro station.

Uniformed police officers stopped several journalists from photographing and filming the events, pushing and kicking them, while plainclothes officers interrogated human rights activists attempting to observe the protests.

According to local rights groups six more activists had been detained yesterday in connection with the protest, bringing the total number of those arrested before the protest to 17.

Vugar Hasanli, Teymur Abbasli, Ibrahim Ahmadzade and Tahir Abdullayev were arrested by police late on 1 April. They were picked up by officers from their homes in and around Baku.

Youth activists Kamal and Orkhan Huseynov were also abducted from their home in Baku by several men in plainclothes who did not identify themselves as police or give their names.

Vugar Hasanli has already been sentenced to 10 days administrative detention, while Ibrahim Ahmadzade was sentenced to 7 days administrative detention.

At least seven individuals have now been sentenced to administrative detention, most under Article 310.1 of Azerbaijan's Administrative Code which bans "willful disobedience of a police official."

The majority of these trials took place behind closed doors, without the defendants having access to legal

representation.

“The fact that key organizers are being arrested in advance, and sentenced in closed trials of offences that have yet to take place, is indicative of the length to which the authorities are prepared to go to silence dissenting voices,” John Dalhuisen said.

Political activists Arzu Musayev and Kifayet Musayev said police had told them not to leave their home district of Gadabay to attend the rally in Baku, and that when they did they were followed by police officers all day.

Azerbaijan state TV has reported that the 2nd April protest is an attempt by foreign powers to destabilize Azerbaijan. State controlled television stations have also broadcast several programs depicting Facebook users as mentally ill.

“The Azerbaijani government cannot credibly maintain that is making progress in its democratic development whilst systematically clamping down on social movements and political gatherings that it disapproves of,” said John Dalhuisen.